



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

January/February 1992

FACING DEATH

At some point in our lives, we get the phone call: the diagnosis is grim, someone close to us is facing death. Perhaps terminal cancer, perhaps a weak heart, perhaps something more obscure but equally without medical solution. The call may come from a parent or a sibling, or a close friend. Then we must deal with the prospect of death.

In some ways the prospect is harder to deal with than death itself. There is a certain finality to the moment of death which is lacking in the prospect. We are not sure whether to accept the person's death as a fact or whether to hope for a miracle. Dealing with him involves some awkwardness: do we try to go on with the relationship as if nothing were changed, or do we try to wrap things up? Either way we can get into trouble, depending on how the person is dealing with his illness, and how much he knows or is willing to accept.

Practically, there are several ways we deal with someone's approaching death. Since these attitudes are not entirely compatible, we often shift from one to the other. This is especially true when the disease (like cancer) has its own ups and downs.

We may deal with the diagnosis by pinning all our hopes upon a medical solution. We look to the doctors, the specialists, the researchers, to come up with a cure. With the technology of modern medicine these days, it seems as if there is always one more thing to try. Hope becomes the hope for a medical solution -- and no more. The problem with this attitude is that it is not entirely realistic: it becomes a denial of the reality that death is in fact likely and not too far away. Medical hope becomes an excuse for denying what is true.

Then there is the approach to death which pins all hope on a miracle. This is but a slightly more Christian version of hoping for medical salvation. Every sign of progress is seized upon, and each sign of degeneration brings despair. It is as unrealistic as medical

hope, in that we are demanding a miracle: not just disposing ourselves to accept a miracle, but demanding one. Our passionate commitment to a miracle keeps us from being realistic about what is going on, and thus ministering to the person in the reality of sickness and coming death.

There is also the form of denial which tries to go on with life as usual, and pretends that nothing is wrong. The illness is never mentioned, nor the rather obvious fact that the sick person can no longer do everything as before. This denial is, of course, but the extension of the laudable desire not to make the sick person feel worse than he does already. We want to help him get on with as normal and human a life as possible. But it is easy to let that desire slip into a denial that there is anything abnormal -- as such illness certainly is.

At the other extreme is the sort of realism which effectively writes the person off. We assume that death is inevitable, so under the guise of being realistic we begin to treat the person as if he were already dead. We begin thinking about all the things that will have to be done: selling the house, disposing of the furniture, settling the estate, and so on. We stop getting presents on holidays or buying new things for the house, figuring all that is needless in the face of death. The problem here is that while trying to be realistic, we end up denying the power of God to intervene in our lives. We cut off the possibility that He might heal the person, either by some medical intervention or by an outright miracle. The future is His, and if we limit the future (for ourselves or for others), we rather presumptuously take to ourselves that which is God's.

Each of these attitudes has an element of truth to it. And thus we are apt to flit from one to another in the course of seeing someone through a last illness. The difficult part is putting the good in all of them together, to arrive at some true Christian realism. Christians (alone of mankind) can afford to be realistic about human life. The Cross allows us to look the evils of this life squarely in the face, and see them for all the evil and destruction and pain which they cause. We can face them because we know that they have been overcome -- by God's act on the Cross. We have received God's testimony that there is a stronger and more fundamental power in the world -- the power of sacrificial love. In Jesus, this love came into the world and triumphed -- by dying. So we have nothing to fear, not even death.

When it comes to the approach of death, we need to trust. We can admit that death is an evil. None of us likes to die or to see a friend die. We experience death as a violation of our nature, which it is. Death came into the world as the result of our sin, and constitutes (or did constitute) Satan's greatest weapon against us. He tries to make us afraid of death, to make us lose hope and to test our faith in things unseen.

So even while we admit death to be an evil, we need not fear it, for it has been overcome. By dying, Jesus conquered death, rising on Easter morning. "O death, where is thy sting?" Death may be painful, but we need not be afraid. We can commend the illness to God, trusting Him for whatever

outcome. If it is unto death, then the person goes to the bliss of His presence, fulfilling (by His grace) a Christian life in a Christian death. If there is to be a cure, then that too comes from God's hand, and is for the best in the lives of all concerned.

When someone close is facing death, we are apt to be overwhelmed by the prospect of life without that relationship. We fear for ourselves, for our emotional lack. But this too God wills to redeem. When we are willing to share it with Him, He will over time (and it sometimes takes a long time) take its burden from us. In our spiritual development it is to be an opportunity to depend the more intimately upon Him. For such sorrow can seem overwhelming, and beyond any human comfort.

We need to give ourselves into His hands. "Thy will not mine be done." We know -- both from experience and from the testimony of Scripture -- that God wills only what is best for us: so we can trust Him. Sometimes, of course, His will for us includes the Cross -- as it did for Jesus. But in Him such suffering (as in the loss of a friend) is redemptive. We share it with Him. He helps us through it. And we end up more intimate with Him, more dependent upon Him, more ready for heaven ourselves.

This trust -- or if we cannot quite bring ourselves to trust, then the desire to trust -- allows us to be realistic about the situation. We can begin to accept the physical weakness and the limitations which it imposes on life. We need not exaggerate them, but neither need we deny them. However severe, however painful they may be, they cannot separate either of us from God. It is always hard to watch someone suffer, but if we will trust God, the experience will strengthen rather than break down our relationship with Him. This same trust will keep us from being overwhelmed emotionally by the suffering and by the prospect of death. Those of a more affective temperament are particularly hard hit in such times. But then we must cling the more closely to our Savior, remembering not only His death, but also that He wept at the tomb of His friend, Lazarus. He knows what it is like. This will help us to resist the temptation to think that suffering renders life worthless, that death would be better: it is God who gives life worth, whether we can discern it or not. And Jesus' life manifested its greatest "worth" in His sorest suffering.

If we can deal with our own Christian lives when a friend comes near to death, then we will be in a position to help him. We help in the first place by intercession. Placing the person in God's hands in prayer presupposes that God will do what is best for him. Intercession is not then primarily a matter of praying for a miracle or for a painless and speedy death. Rather it involves our holding up the person before God, and willing to share the spiritual burden of his suffering. We can imagine the trials which his faith must face: doubt, sadness, guilt, even panic and fear, depending on his temperament. The weakness of the flesh will make it hard for him to pay attention to his prayers. Satan will be the more active in tempting him, for our foe is no gentleman! All this we can share in our prayer -- even if a visit is impossible, or if the person is comatose or otherwise unable to respond.

Trusting in God, we may also be able to help more directly. There are some things to be settled before dying, after all. Materially, there is the disposition of the estate: making a will, providing for family (if any) and Christian charity. Burial arrangements should be made, if possible, especially provision for a proper service in the church. Even more, there is spiritual preparation to be made. First and foremost is an examination of conscience, in order to repent for all known sins, making restitution wherever possible, and asking forgiveness from all those who have been wronged. Similarly, wherever forgiveness has been withheld, it must now be offered. We cannot die gracefully with such burdens on our conscience. So far as it can be done on the deathbed, the relationship with God must be made right.

We need to be careful, however. Just because these things need to be done before death does not mean that we are the ones to help the dying person to do it. We need to be sensitive to the particular kind of support and care that is needed from us. We ought not assume, for example, that just because the person is dying, that automatically establishes an intimacy between us: that he will want to discuss his deepest thoughts and fears with us. He may, of course, and we should be ready to respond. But he may also wish to do this with someone else, or with his priest, or not at all.

We need also to be careful about imposing our own ideas of how the illness is to be dealt with. We might think, "The cancer is terminal; it's foolish and weak to go through chemotherapy which has only a one-in-five chance of prolonging life, and then only for a year or two. I wouldn't do that were I in that situation." Our place (as it always is in Christian life) is not to tell others how they should live their lives (we've enough trouble with our own!) but to help them make informed and Christian decisions. We can give advice if asked, but we should not presume to know better and judge the other for his decisions.

Since most of us die exactly as we have lived, we cannot plan to repent on our death bed. We must practice this every day of our lives, not just because we are ignorant of the hour of death, but also in order to be penitent whenever that time may come. We ought not assume that there will be time even with a lengthy illness to establish peace with God and man from the deathbed, but rather to cultivate it while death is nowhere in sight.

It is a moving experience to attend a faithful Christian at his death. The testimony of a clear conscience, of a life of dependence upon God, stands as witness to the efficacy of the Christian life. Let us all aspire to so live that we can make this witness at the hour of death. The Desert Fathers, who lived a remarkably ascetic life, taught that we should treat our bodies as if we were to live forever and our souls as if we would die tomorrow. It is good advice, whether we are in good health or in the near presence of death.

